

Archeological Conservation at the NYU Excavations at Aphrodisias

Aphrodisias lies in southwestern Turkey, in a fertile valley 100 miles southeast of the port of Izmir. Famous for its sanctuary of Aphrodite, the city enjoyed a long and prosperous existence from the 1st-century B.C. through the 6th-century A.D. Professor Kenan Erim began the modern archeological exploration of Aphrodisias in 1961, under the aegis of the New York University Department of Classics. In the course of his work at the site, he uncovered many well-preserved buildings in the city center, including the Bouleuterion, Theater, and Sanctuary of the Emperors (Sebasteion).¹ These excavations also brought to light the numerous marble sculptures for which Aphrodisias is famous.

After the death of Professor Erim in 1990, the New York University Institute of Fine Arts assumed sponsorship of the exploration of Aphrodisias in cooperation with the Faculty of Arts and Science. Current work at Aphrodisias includes the study and conservation of sculpture

and structures, as well as new fieldwork. The goals of the new program of fieldwork are to record and conserve the excavated buildings of the site and to investigate the ancient city plan and urban development.² As the fieldwork progresses, new artifacts and decorative elements are uncovered, and previously excavated artifacts are again the subjects of study, all of which require conservation.

Conservation activities at Aphrodisias focus on three

main areas, all of which share personnel and facilities:

- sculptures
- buildings and *in situ* decorative elements, and
- small finds

Trevor Proudfoot, of Cliveden Conservation Workshop, Ltd., England, supervises sculpture conservation. Many of the sculptures at Aphrodisias were hastily reassembled shortly after excavation using epoxy and polyester resin adhesives, iron or steel dowels, and resin mortar or plaster of Paris compensation. There is very little documentation related to these early treatments and in many cases the sculptures were incorrectly assembled and are now unstable. Removal of these materials and the development of new installations for the Aphrodisias Museum are essential for long-term preservation and better understanding of the sculptures by both scholars and the general public.

In 1994, a new workshop/depot for sculpture conservation was completed in the excavation house compound. Major projects undertaken in this building have included treatment of a well-preserved portrait sculpture of a young noble and an associated draped female portrait, a large Himation statue, and life-sized portraits of two boxers. In 1999, the first panel of a series of approximately 60 sculpted panels uncovered in the Sebasteion was treated; these reliefs will be the focus of sculpture conservation activities for several years to come.

In 1993, personnel from Cliveden Conservation initiated a program of wall stabilization and maintenance for standing structures on the site. Most of the buildings discovered in the early years of excavations have remained exposed with little or no protection for the last 20-30 years. Using lime mortar that nearly duplicates the mortar used in the original construction of typical wall fabric, as well as materials and local workers, the system was first implemented in the conservation of a late Byzantine church between 1994 and 1995. Since then, a late

Sculpture workshop/depot at Aphrodisias with draped female portrait sculpture (1996).



Reconstructed monumental gateway, or Tetrapylon, during maintenance operations in 1998.



Roman house north of the Temple of Aphrodite and the public buildings to the east of the Bouleuterion have been treated. This work is currently supervised jointly by Cliveden staff and myself as senior field conservator. During the 2000 season, with the generous support of a Samuel H. Kress Foundation award through the World Monuments Fund, work was begun on the conservation of the Bouleuterion, beginning with the stabilization of the massive limestone piers of the stage building. This program will continue in coming seasons and include treatment of marble revetments and replacement of the numerous aging repairs to the seats.

Concurrent with the wall stabilization program, *in situ* decorative elements, such as wall paintings, revetments, opus sectile floors, and mosaics, are regularly treated. Mosaics are cleaned and, where necessary, consolidated and edged using lime mortars derived from the modern lime mortar used in wall stabilization. The current program of research at Aphrodisias does not include development of new roofing structures that would allow for display of *in situ* mosaics to the public. Therefore, both newly discovered mosaics and those from earlier excavations that have been cleaned for study are usually protected by reburial, with geotextiles next to the original materials, followed by layers of clean sand and soil. Between 1996 and 2000, wall paintings in the apse corridor of the Basilica Church of Aphrodisias (the converted Temple of Aphrodite), in the substructure of the stadium, and in the Theater and the Theater Baths were consolidated and edged.

One of the most prominent monuments at Aphrodisias is the reconstructed Tetrapylon. The

building was reconstructed during the late 1980s, but had not been inspected or maintained since completion of the work in 1989. The Tetrapylon was scaffolded one half at a time in 1998 and 1999, and inspected by the restoration architect, Tomas Kaefer, and myself. Together with this inspection, the condition of the monument was documented, surfaces cleaned, and repairs made to joints between the elements.

Since 1996, small finds, such as coins, ceramics, smaller sculptures, iron and bronze artifacts, and glass, have been treated in a new, well-equipped laboratory located in the yard of the expedition compound. Student trainees, primarily from the New York University Institute of Fine Arts Conservation Training Program and, in recent years, from Ankara University's conservation training program and the Middle East Technical University (Ankara) archaeometry program, have been a welcome addition to the Aphrodisias conservation team. Under my supervision, these students work primarily on small finds, but also participate in other projects as the need arises.

At Aphrodisias, conservators are charged with the care and preservation conservation of the accumulated artifacts, sculptures, and exposed buildings of 40 years of exploration, together with new finds yielded by ongoing research and excavation. A project that sometimes feels like an overwhelming burden is made possible through teamwork and the pleasure of living and working in a beautiful setting with materials from a beautifully preserved ancient city.

Notes

- ¹ Professor Erim's work is summarized in: Kenan T. Erim, *Aphrodisias: City of Venus Aphrodite* (New York and Oxford: Facts on File, 1986).
- ² For the most recent account of ongoing work at Aphrodisias, see: R. R. R. Smith and Christopher Ratté, "Archaeological Research at Aphrodisias in Caria, 1997 and 1998," *American Journal of Archaeology*, 104: 2 (2000): 221 – 253.

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Photos by the author.